

WHO OWNS THE FISH?

GRANDFATHER: Did you know that in the past, some countries almost went to war over fish?

GIRL: Huh? Why?

GRANDFATHER: They were fighting over the best fishing grounds. More fish means more money.

GIRL: Cool! So when I become a fisherwoman, I'm going to where the best fish are, too!

GRANDFATHER: Sorry to disappoint you, but you can't actually fish in those places.

GIRL: How come?

GRANDFATHER: Those countries own those fish. They can't fish in our waters either.

GIRL: But how can a country *own* fish?

GRANDFATHER: Well, after all that fighting over fishing grounds, countries decided the best thing was to each claim a piece of the water.

Today, up to 200 miles from the coast of any country is now that country's commercial fishing zone.

The U.S. has the biggest zone in the world!

GIRL: OK then. I'll just fish where we live!

GRANDFATHER: Actually, it's not that easy. If you want to be a fisherwoman, you might have to buy some quota.

GIRL: What's a quota?

GRANDFATHER: The fish that swim around here used to belong to everyone. But that's changed.

GIRL: (Gasps) How did *that* happen?

GRANDFATHER: Forty years ago, any commercial fisherman could go and fish as much as they wanted all year long.

But one day, they discovered that they had fished too much.

You see, every fisherman worried about catching more than his competition.

GIRL: Oh ... so it was like a race!

GRANDFATHER: Right.

GIRL: So then what happened?

GRANDFATHER: To stop the overfishing, laws were made to tell fishermen *when* they could fish.

But ... that just made the problem worse.

The fish kept disappearing.

So more laws were passed to say how *much* fish could be caught.

GIRL: Did it work?

GRANDFATHER: It's hard to say. Some say it did, others weren't so sure.

GIRL: So *then* what did they do?

GRANDFATHER: They tried a new idea. It's called "catch shares."

It goes like this: If a small group of people owned the fish, they might take better care of them.

GIRL: That's good for the fish!

GRANDFATHER: Well, it's not that simple.

GIRL: Didn't think so ...

GRANDFATHER: Remember when they limited how much fish could be caught?

In a catch share system, that total amount is divided up into pieces called shares, also called quota. This quota is given away to fishermen and fishing companies. How much quota you got depended on how much you fished there in the past.

GIRL: What if someone like me wanted to fish? I don't have any quota!

GRANDFATHER: Then, you're not allowed to fish. No quota, no fishing.
You see, something rare, becomes more valuable.
And since quota is treated like private property... .

GIRL: Like my house! Or my bike!

GRANDFATHER: Quota can be traded, bought or sold on the open market.

Which is what lots of fishermen did. They rented or sold their shares off.

GIRL: To other fishermen?

GRANDFATHER: Yeah, but not always.
In fact, many fishermen and seafood companies bought lots of quota and rented them to those who wanted it but didn't have any.
These quota owners are called armchair fishermen.

GIRL: (Giggles) So they hired other people to fish for them.

GRANDFATHER: Right. And they also take a cut of all the money made. With catch shares, it's easier for a few players to control most of a fishery.

GIRL: What do you mean?

GRANDFATHER: I'll give you an example. New Zealand had one of the first catch share systems in the world. Today, only eight companies produce 80 percent of all fish from there.

GIRL: America isn't like New Zealand though.

GRANDFATHER: No, but more of our fisheries *are* using catch shares now.
And that's where most fish in America is caught.

GIRL: So did catch shares stop overfishing?

GRANDFATHER: The thing is, we're not sure it has. With catch shares, many fish have returned, but there are many that haven't.

But not *all* catch share fisheries squeeze out small fishermen! Some make sure that quota only stays within the community.

Most though, don't work that way.

GIRL: Maybe there are other ways to take care of our fish.

GRANDFATHER: Maybe. Catch shares *are* only one solution.

For instance, our government could rent out quota, not give them away to keep forever. The money collected could help better conserve our fish.

GRANDFATHER: Like stopping those who fish too much.

GIRL: Yeah, no cheating!

GRANDFATHER: And making sure rules are followed at sea, too.

GIRL: Good for the fish!

Hmmm.... You know what? I've changed my mind, I'm gonna be an astronaut instead.

THE END